THE OPTION
for the
POOR
in
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

edited by

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In the spring of 2000, Virgilio Elizondo and I attended a meeting in Paris, France. While we were there, he asked me if I wanted to get together with a good friend of his named Gustavo Gutiérrez. I was grateful for the invitation because for many years I had been greatly influenced by Gutiérrez's writings and welcomed the chance to meet him in person. The three of us went out to lunch together and spent hours talking about many things, not the least of which was the option for the poor in Christian theology and where it stood as an issue within the church and the academy today.

This lunch in Paris was particularly timely. It was becoming less clear where this topic of the poor fit within the discipline of academic theology. Undoubtedly, many today recognize how Gutiérrez has pioneered a new area in the discipline and has put this whole notion of the preferential option for the poor on the theological map. But as I looked at the current state of the question, I wondered if, at least in theology, the theme was receding into the background.

There were various reasons why the preferential option for the poor seemed at low ebb. One was the inevitable development of the theme and its transformation into new expressions, accelerated in particular by
changes brought about by globalization. While Gustavo’s groundbreaking work *A Theology of Liberation* in 1973 reflected on the preferential option from the perspective of those who faced dire economic poverty, in the years that followed it became evident that this option had to include not just those who were marginalized economically but also those who were poor because of gender, race, culture, and other reasons.1 As the idea developed, this central notion of God’s preference for the poor extended to all who are vulnerable. The notion has not disappeared; whereas in previous generations most areas did not show even a trace of reflection on the subject, today almost every area of theology shows its influence.

At the same time I realized that the notion of the option for the poor could be understood so broadly as to lose much of its meaning. Saying “We are all poor” takes the edge off the challenge of the option and makes the notion so commonplace that it is hollow and empty. Such a perspective also preempts the conversion process that is inevitably a part of this option. Further, it can reduce the task of theology to an abstract exercise rooted in peripheral questions rather than a concrete exercise of faith seeking understanding within the particular social challenges of our contemporary context. Partially because our understanding of poverty has become more and more complex, and also partially because the option for the poor has become so watered down that it can apply to everyone and mean little, many theologians now believe that the liberation theology of the late 1960s through the 1990s has made its contribution and run its course. Some might even say the river has dried up. Given that fewer people seem to be interested in the topic, it looks almost as if this topic has been somewhat of a theological fad that has come and gone. The fire that ignited such passion a few decades ago has burned low, and as the coals of liberation begin to lose their heat some wonder whether it will simply die out all together or be just an occasional spark here and there. As Gutiérrez, Elizondo, and I ate lunch, I thought much about these questions, so it seemed particularly urgent to throw some more socioeconomic wood on the theological fire.

**Poverty: An Ancient Problem, A Contemporary Theological Challenge**

Since Elizondo, Gutiérrez, and others began writing about poverty and liberation in the 1960s, in many respects the situation of the poor today
has gotten worse, not better. While there is good news that more than half the world is experiencing economic progress because of globalization, the bad news is that the other half still does not have even one foot on the development ladder. The other half still lives on less than two dollars a day, and the current course of globalization has only further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The income disparities between the richest and the poorest have deteriorated at a rate never before witnessed in human history. The economic difference between the richest and poorest countries was 3:1 in 1820, 11:1 in 1913, 35:1 in 1950, 44:1 in 1973, and 72:1 in 1992. Research in the new millennium indicates that this gap continues to widen and worsen. The critical condition of the poor in our times makes the concept of the option for the poor not less but more important than ever. And the task of thinking critically and academically in the face of the current, complex social reality of poverty is one of the great theological challenges, if not the central theological challenge, of our times. This volume seeks to address that challenge as well as examine the ways it is being reconceived and renegotiated in light of today’s global realities.

Gutiérrez, Elizondo, and others like them did not invent the notion of the preferential option for the poor but rather drew it out of the Christian tradition. They sought to read current social problems in light of the Gospel, as did the first Christians. From the earliest days of the church, the reality of poverty has made an explicit demand on Christian conscience. The preferential option for the poor is in fact one of the oldest and most central themes of Scripture. Amidst the doctrinal controversies of the early church, when many dimensions of the faith were being debated by Paul and theological doctrine was still up for grabs, the one thing that was clear to all of them—whatever their doctrinal differences—was “to be mindful of the poor” (Gal. 2:10). This is no less true today. Whatever doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversies the church faces, the one central issue of Christian faith that all can agree on is commitment to the poor. What does theology say to the countless people still subjected to high infant mortality, inadequate housing, health problems, starvation wages, unemployment and underemployment, malnutrition, job uncertainty, compulsory mass migration, and many other problems?

While theologians have made many important contributions over the last decades and liberationist themes have permeated various disciplines, the issue of the poor more and more appears to sit on the sidelines.
of Christian theology rather than be one of the central players on the theological field. Whatever else theology says or wherever else it takes us, the preferential option for the poor is at the heart of Christian theology. Without it, theology can become useless or irrelevant. But how does one make this option and do Christian theology in a globalized world and even a theological discipline that has become more and more complex? To me this is one of the great challenges that lie ahead, and it has been one of the great moments to build a community of reflection where a team of theologians could work together to reflect on how our theological task could be enriched when done from the perspective of the least of our brothers and sisters.

When Gutiérrez, Elizondo, and I came to the University of Notre Dame in the fall of 2000, I believed that one of the important places to begin this community of dialogue would be a conference on the preferential option for the poor. I believed such an event could bring together a group of senior theologians and honor the foundational work of Gutiérrez and Elizondo but also bring together from around the world younger theologians like myself who were interested in this same theme and could begin to advance the topic in the decades ahead. I also felt that the conference could bring together not only scholars but church leaders, activists, and other pastoral workers who work with the poor on the grassroots level. This gathering, I believed, could facilitate a rich dialogue on the option for the poor, engage a broad cross section of experience, and forge new networks of relationships that could bear fruit in new projects that would advance some of the pioneering work Gutiérrez and Elizondo had begun.

In the fall of 2002, this dream became a reality, and we sponsored a conference at Notre Dame entitled “The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology.” We invited men and women from around the world to come together for three days to reflect on the reality of poverty, the biblical and patristic foundations of the option for the poor, and specific themes relating to culture, gender, race, and other issues. These presentations were the beginning of this edited volume. We also invited other scholars from different parts of the world to add essays to those we had from the conference, and the eventual result was this present collection. Through its essays we came to see how the preferential option for the poor has now extended to other areas like gender, race, and culture in a way that it has enriched many different areas of theology.
THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AS A THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

Since the publication of Gutiérrez’s groundbreaking work *A Theology of Liberation* in 1973, much has been written on the preferential option for the poor and liberation theology. Arguably, it has been one of the most important theological developments of the twentieth century. It has also been one of the most controversial. The option for the poor in Christian theology seeks to respond to the question: How can one live a Christian life in a world of destitution? The starting point for Gutiérrez’s work and for many theologians since then has always been the reality of poverty. That is, theological reflection begins from the perspective of those who are poor, those who are marginalized from mainstream society, who have no influence or voice in the socioeconomic and political processes that so profoundly shape their lives and condemn them to dehumanizing misery.

Though an accurate grasp of social reality is an important foundation to this book, we are concerned here with the option for the poor not simply as a socioeconomic problem or even a compassionate gesture but most of all as a theological concept. The option for the poor finds its meaning and purpose not simply in logical reasoning and humanitarian virtue—although it includes these—but in the very life of God. One can speak about a preferential option for the poor because the Judeo-Christian Scriptures reveal first of all a God of life who opted for the poor in the past and continues to opt for the poor in the present. The whole ethical foundation for Israel rests not in an arbitrary commandment from God but in the memory of how God acted on behalf of Israel in her insignificance: “For, remember, you were once slaves in Egypt, and the LORD, your God, ransomed you from there; that is why I command you to observe this rule” (Deut. 24:18). In other words, the heart of Yahweh reveals a God who says, “Because you were poor and I had mercy on you, you too must also have mercy on those who are poor in your midst.” In this sense, Israel’s liberation from Egypt—a paradigm for all people oppressed in bondage in any form and called to live in the freedom of the Children of God—is both a gift and a demand. Because of God’s option for Israel in her insignificance, Israel is called in faith to respond to others in the same way, especially to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Deut. 24).

While liberation theology has always begun with the reality of poverty, in recent decades much more has been written about how to understand the complex reality of poverty and its many dimensions. This volume
begins, then, not with doctrine or Scripture or the experience of the early church but with the experience of poor people today. Gutiérrez’s essay gives us a social and theological framework for understanding the multidimensionality of poverty. Elsewhere he notes that in some ways poverty is like Noah’s ark: when we look inside, we see a poverty animal of every kind—spiritual poverty, racial poverty, gender poverty, and many other species. As Gutiérrez notes, “To be poor means to be insignificant.” It does not mean only that one does not have money, although this is certainly a big part of it and one of the primary roots of the problem. To be poor means that one does not have options, that one does not have opportunities, that one dies before one’s time. The poor undergo death on many different levels—sickness, fatigue, hunger, the violation of human rights—and they suffer dehumanization and the negation of life in many other ways. Though this volume looks at many different kinds of poverty, its essays are unified around the theme that poverty is contrary to the will of the God of life.

But this book is not just another work on the complexity of poverty and its many dimensions. Fundamentally, as noted above, it is about how to understand this reality from a faith perspective. Moreover, it is about how to do a faith reading of reality. If one may even put this forth modestly but directly, it is an attempt to ask, What does God say about this reality? What demands does this reality make on human conscience? How, in the face of the reality of poverty, can one live out an authentic response of discipleship? These are some of the fundamental questions that The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology seeks to address.

Following Gutiérrez’s initial essay on the multidimensionality of poverty, we look at some of the foundational sources that shape our reflection on this topic. Among these, the principal sources are the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, as the essays by Elsa Tamez and by Hugh R. Page Jr. give us ample opportunity to realize. Tamez brings out how this option for the poor is not only the option of the God of Israel or the option of Jesus Christ but the option to which all Christians are called. In this respect, the word option can easily distort the theological meaning of the concept. Option does not mean that those who profess Christian faith can choose to work for the liberation of the poor or not, as if it were a matter of buying a red car or blue car. From the perspective of fidelity to the Gospel, the option for the poor is not “optional,” as if one can say “no” to the option and still call oneself a Christian. Rather, option here means that there is a
choice and that the choice entails making the poor central to one’s vision of life, as they were for Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19). As Tamez says, “We can affirm that precisely because the love of God is universal, God opts for the poor so that there may no longer be excluded persons in society.”

In a similar vein, Hugh Page explores what this option looks like from the vantage point of African Americans living in the United States. He presents the experience of the poor as the hermeneutical starting point for reading the Scriptures and shows how the Scriptures not only give us an account of the poor in Israel but offer marginalized groups like African Americans a new way of imagining one’s life before God and before the powers that be. They subvert the existing power structure and offer hope to all who are oppressed: in other words, they give us a new way of imagining one’s place in the world created by God.

The second major theological foundation for the option for the poor is explored in the essays by Brian E. Daley and Jon Sobrino, which show how, in addition to the Scriptures, the writings of the church fathers help us understand the early church’s approach to issues of faith, poverty, and even martyrdom. The power of reading these church fathers, and looking at them in light of the current social challenges, is that of hearing them speak from their own generation an enduring and liberating truth for all generations. The patristic foundation offers a way of reading the present, and attentiveness to the present reality gives a new way of understanding the church fathers and their times. Daley looks at some of the anthropological and moral issues raised by the Cappadocian fathers—Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus—in the context of poverty of their own day and age, and he brings out how one of their major contributions was their Christological understanding and the philosophical tradition that anchored it. As much as these theologians dealt with formulating abstract theological language about the mystery of God as a Trinity, they “shared an urgent concern to draw the attention of their contemporaries to the plight of the poor, the diseased, the marginalized, the ‘insignificant’ . . . precisely as a challenge to faith in the transforming work of an incarnate, self-communicating God.”
Jon Sobrino, who many know was a member of the house of the Jesuits in El Salvador who were murdered by death squads in 1989, speaks about how martyrs are witnesses not only of the ancient church but also of the contemporary church. Grounding his reflections on “the crucified peoples of today,” he speaks of those who have chosen to opt for the God of life and challenge unjust structures—a varied group including peasants, workers, students, lawyers, doctors, teachers, intellectuals, journalists, catechists, priests, religious, bishops, and archbishops, only a few of whom are publicly recognized. He argues that the problem with the current state of the world is not atheism but idolatry, not a matter of if one believes in God but what God one believes in. His essay is a stark reflection on reality as it is defined by the poor, the defense of the poor as it reaches its maximum expression in the martyrs, and the martyrs as they bear witness to the undying love of God. Sobrino notes that “without a willingness to get involved in the conflict of reality, to shoulder its weight, and to pay some price, the church will not bring salvation. Nor will it have credibility.”

While theological reflection on the option for the poor is thoroughly grounded in social reality and thoroughly oriented toward creating a more just and humane social order in this world, Christian hope also looks to the future as it looks for the fulfillment of justice. David Tracy and J. Matthew Ashley give us ways of looking at the option for the poor not only from the perspective of the past and the present but also from the perspective of the future as revealed in apocalyptic thought.

According to Tracy, the central problem is not about believing in God in a world of modern science but about believing in a personal God in an age when the poor are considered by the reigning elites as nonpersons. Just as the poor themselves are marginalized in society, the notion of the preferential option has been marginalized in much of theological scholarship. Nonetheless, the poor remain central to faith seeking understanding. An accurate grasp of this faith entails not only attention to the prophetic dimension of the option for poor but also attention to its intrinsic mystical dimension. Part of this mystical dimension affirms not only that Christ came in the flesh and concretely opted for the poor but that this same Christ will come again. Thus Tracy argues that to the great Christological symbols of Incarnation, Cross, and Resurrection we must add Second Coming, with its “Come, Lord Jesus!” Only through the integration of the apocalyptic dimension into the theological framework of believers can the church move from its comfort zone and temptation to domesticate
the Gospel and truly discover its calling to working for a more just and humane society that will reach its fulfillment when Christ comes again.

Ashley’s essay also reiterates that the option for the poor in Christian theology needs to turn to apocalyptic thinking to develop an adequate Christology, one that signals not only the negative dimension of “not yet” but also the positive in-breaking of God’s reign in history. He brings out how part of this apocalyptic mentality, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, is revealed now in the “radical praxis of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned.” What is necessary to ground this vision of Christian discipleship is not only a theology of liberation but a spirituality of liberation that leads to transformed lives. In the process, one comes to see the importance of context in theological reflection and the hermeneutical privilege of the poor in understanding Christian hope. Ashley adds that the option for the poor is so pregnant a theological concept that generations will be needed to discover all the ways it adds to our understanding of God’s saving self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

Another important development in analyzing the multidimensionality of poverty and reflecting on its theological implications is attention to the area of culture. The essays of Virgilio Elizondo and Patrick A. Kalilombe give us powerful reflections on doing a cultural reading of the Gospels and a Gospel reading of culture. They bring out how important social location is in the doing of theology, and how, whether one admits it or not, all theology is culturally conditioned. Elizondo’s essay begins with a declaration of his rootedness in the Mexican American culture of San Antonio, Texas. Kalilombe, on the other hand, locates his reflection within his experience of himself and the church in Malawi, Africa.

Elizondo’s essay elaborates on the multidimensionality of a poverty that cuts across all socioeconomic lines: material poverty, psychological poverty, spiritual poverty, and existential poverty, which—at its root—is a cultural poverty that distorts how human beings come to understand themselves, define themselves, and relate to each other. This issue of culture also brings us face to face with how we deal with differences, especially cultural differences. Elizondo’s essay reflects on how one encounters “the other,” that is, someone who is fundamentally different from oneself. He notes that “the most injurious crime of the conquest of Latin America, and there were many horrible things about it, was that the white European conquistadores imposed a deep sense of shame of being an indio,
mestizo, mulatto.” Elizondo refers to it as a “branding of the soul.” The ultimate meaning of the option for the poor can be found only in the reading of Jesus of Nazareth, who offers us new insight into what it means to be human, beyond the degrading stereotypes imposed on the poor by the sin of society.

Patrick Kalilombe’s essay explores the successes and failures of the building of Christian communities in Malawi, Africa. His reflections are rooted in his experience in Africa, where the social order is breaking down and people wonder what their sense of purpose is. People’s experiences of being dominated, subjugated, disempowered, oppressed, and exploited have led to poverty, insecurity, and the loss of hope for any meaningful development. Kalilombe notes that this is the antithesis of the kingdom of God. He clarifies that the proclamation of the Gospel is not about preaching salvation in the afterlife. Rather, what is needed is a comprehensive message of hope in this life, a hope that life will change for the better and that the poor will someday achieve “real freedom, joy, dignity, and power worthy of God’s children.”

M. Shawn Copeland looks at the experience of African Americans and brings out how many people in the world are multiply oppressed: because of their economic poverty, their culture, and their skin color. For these, poverty is not a concept but a way of life. As she graphically describes, “the poor are children who cannot breathe because of vermin-induced asthma. The poor are mothers who chain-smoke to stave off hunger. The poor are fathers who weep in shame because they cannot protect their families. They stand and wait in lines—to fill out forms, to eat soup, to bathe, to sleep. The poor are brought to resignation; they have no options.” Copeland points out that the option for the poor in Christian theology is an option to stand in solidarity with those who suffer, an option for integrity with the God of life who stands with them.

María Pilar Aquino takes this point further in bringing out how the issue of the option for the poor relates particularly to the experience of women. She notes that “theological discourse that begins from and speaks about the crucified majorities, the suffering peoples, the great masses, or the poor is insufficient if it does not specify that these majorities are women.” Likewise, Mary Catherine Hilkert points out how this issue must be addressed not only within the society at large but even within the church itself. Her essay is also a challenge to reflect more generally on all structures of oppression because oppression cuts across all boundaries of gender and brings out the fundamental human need for conversion.
Luis Maldonado and Casiano Floristán offer a view of the option for the poor from the perspective of popular religiosity in general and the Eucharist in particular. Maldonado’s reflection on Christology comes “from the ground up.” That is, the starting point for his reflections is not simply abstract doctrine, or even the experience of poverty, but the faith expressions of the people of his native Spain. Drawing on the life of the towns, villages, and cities of his country, he reflects on the integral relationship between community and Christology and the suffering of the people, and he describes the God of hope who emerges in a tradition uniquely their own. He brings out how the kingdom of God expresses itself in the profound act of table fellowship, a fellowship that has as its basis the sharing of a meal in which all people—and especially the excluded—are called to participate. The basis of the eucharistic celebration is the communal meal, a meal in which the rich and the poor share in solidarity with each other in the “dangerous and unsettling memory of Jesus.”

Finally, although the option for the poor is at the heart of Christian theology, Michael A. Signer and Aloysius Pieris bring out how this issue is at the heart of other religious traditions as well. Signer gives us a glimpse of what care for the poor means within Judaism. He shows how the Jewish tradition, through its daily prayers, the Hebrew Bible, and the rabbis, gives the Jewish people “a vision of moral grandeur that requires each generation to be linked to courage and audacity of spirit.” He reminds us that the option for the poor is a reflection on God’s justice, which ultimately expresses itself in caring for widows, orphans, and the poor. Pieris looks to how an “identity crisis” in the early church can shed light on a similar identity crisis in the church today and especially on the challenge of preaching the Gospel in the context of Asia, where the majority are non-Christians and where there are many social, economic, and theological challenges on the horizon. However these challenges are answered, it is clear in all the essays above that the poor can and must continue to hold a privileged and central place in the ongoing task of theological reflection.

**The Option for the Poor and Future Theological Reflection**

While the notion of the option for the poor has changed and developed much in recent decades, the depth of this theological concept is just beginning to be explored. At the end of the conference at Notre Dame, after the
senior generation of scholars like those mentioned above had presented their papers, we gathered fifteen young, emerging scholars from ten countries to present the current trajectories of their research. They came from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America to form a community of friends who were interested in a common theme and capable of working on common projects together. These were people like Jacques Haers from Belgium (Christology/liberation theology); Clemens Sedmak from Austria (philosophy/theology/culture); Carlos Mendoza from Mexico (fundamental theology), Mary Doak from the United States (political theology), LaReine Mosely from the United States (black theology), Renata Furst from Canada (biblical theology), Michael Lee from the United States (Ignacio Ellacuría/liberation theology), Paul Kollman from the United States (Africa/missiology), María José Caram from Argentina (Latin America/feminist theology), Gioacchino Campese from Italy (migration), Jude Fernando from Sri Lanka (Asian liberation theology), John Markey from the United States (American philosophy/liberation theology), and Sr. Therese Tinkasimire from Africa (pastoral theology). This moment of the conference marked an important beginning and an important transition. It was a time to express gratitude to those who had opened up new perspectives in theology, a time to found a new community of reflection, and a time to embrace new theological challenges in light of the pressing social questions of today. At the conference, each young theologian had a chance to speak about the particular context and his or her research trajectory, and afterwards, fittingly, Gutiérrez gave each young theologian a cross (handmade by Edilberto Mérida, the artist who made the cross of the “passionate Christ” on the cover of *A Theology of Liberation*). Gutiérrez put a cross in the hand of each and said, “Go forth and do theology according to the image of the crucified.” It is my hope that this publication will contribute to this effort in some small way.

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Notes

3. As noted in the 2005 Human Development Report, “On average, people in developing countries are healthier, better educated and less impoverished—and they are more likely to live in a multiparty democracy. Since 1990 life expectancy in developing countries has increased by 2 years. There are 3 million fewer child deaths annually and 30 million fewer out of school. More than 130 million people have escaped extreme poverty. These human developments should not be underestimated.” At the same time the report says these advances should not be


7. For a good introduction that examines this question in more depth, see Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

Part One

The Multidimensional Reality of Poverty
Chapter 1

MEMORY AND PROPHECY

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, September 1962, John XXIII would suggest an innovative pastoral and theological perspective when he spoke of the church of the poor. “Before the underdeveloped countries,” he said in an oft-cited text, “the church is, and wants to be, the church of all people and especially the church of the poor.” If this proposition had few immediate repercussions, the intuition behind it did have an impact in the following years.

It expressed a sensibility to the new questions humanity was asking itself and a willingness to listen to what God is telling us throughout history. That is, it suggested a reading of the “signs of the times,” an invitation to adopt a view that was perceptive, critical, and at the same time hopeful, sensitive to the positive elements of the historical moment—regardless of how difficult that moment might seem—but also alert to the dark clouds on the horizon.

It is significant that at the fortieth anniversary of the pope’s statement and of the opening of the council we find ourselves reflecting theologically on the paths that were opened on that occasion and through which the Christian community in Latin America’s life and understanding of faith
took shape. The perspective that John XXIII articulated manifests itself in the prioritized commitment to the least of society, which is formulated as the preferential option for the poor.

In the summer of 1967, I was welcomed to the University of Notre Dame by Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., and other friends, and I began work on the biblical significance of poverty and of the poor. In July of 1968 I taught a class at the University of Montreal and began writing on what we would later call the theology of liberation.

The expression *preferential option for the poor* was constructed piece by piece, starting from the experience of many people who belonged to many different Christian communities, as well as lay movements, in solidarity with the poor around the years when the episcopal conference at Medellín took place. The focus was later picked up by the Puebla conference, giving the phrase the recognition we know currently in many different areas of the Christian churches and indeed outside them as well.

The preferential option for the poor is not merely a phrase. It is a style of life that has inspired much commitment on three diverse but interrelated levels: the pastoral level, perhaps the most visible; the theological level, as a point of view for doing theology; and, as the basis of all this, the spiritual level, pertaining to the following of Jesus.

In this chapter, I emphasize the second of these levels, namely how the option for the poor relates to theological reflection. However, the option for the poor has a theological dimension because it is situated between the proclamation of the Gospel and the *secuela Christi*, or spirituality. What I find interesting is the theological challenge that comes from the situation of the poor, as well as the place and scope of the option within the theological task. Thus I am not merely mentioning one aspect of this option but rather going to the heart of it: it is a theocentric option, centered on the gratuitousness of God’s love. Because God’s love is universal, nothing and no one lies outside it; at the same time, God gives priority attention to the insignificant and the oppressed. The term *preference* in the phrase *preferential option for the poor* recalls both dimensions of God’s love: universality and preference. By going to the root of these concepts we can understand the meaning of the option for the poor.

The preferential option for the poor was manifested with precision and beauty by a person who knew how to be in solidarity with the indigenous peoples of the lands that are today known as the Americas. I am referring to the Dominican missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, who in the
sixteenth century said of the foundation of his defense of Indians’ rights (and later of the rights of Africans, who were violently incorporated into the history of this continent): “God has a very vivid and recent memory of the smallest and the most forgotten.”

This text shall inspire three reflections. First we will consider the memory of God as the foundation of the option for the poor. We will then ask who the poor are and how we understand poverty. We will conclude with some perspectives on the tasks that lie ahead of us.

THE MEMORY OF GOD

The understanding of faith begins, historically speaking, from the location of the human person and the location in which believers profess their faith. From there they reflect, inspired by the memory of God, which is a “central concept in the biblical understanding of God.” Their own memory of the initiative of God’s love is always present. This is the framework for the faith life of the follower of Jesus, which is also that of a “faith seeking understanding.”

The Present of Our Past

In the Bible, memory is not principally, or exclusively, related to the past; its primary link is with a present that projects into the future. The past is there, but to give depth and fullness to the present moment of the believer. To phrase it another way, precisely and briefly, as Augustine did: “Memory is the present of the past.” If it evokes a previous event, it is because of the relevance of that event to the present. In both the First (Old) and Second (New) Testaments, expressions abound that say that God is at work in the world today and that consequently God’s followers must make decisions in the present moment. Memory in the Bible goes beyond the conceptual; it points toward a conduct, a practice designed to transform reality. To remember is to have in mind, or care for, someone or something. One remembers in order to act. Without this, memory lacks meaning; it is limited to being a kind of intellectual gymnastics.

This is a memory that grasps time, subverts whatever cynicism and indifference have accumulated there over the years regarding the least ones of history, and converts it into a permanent, exigent, and creative present.
of the way to God, of commitment to the poor and struggle for the con-
struction of a just and friendly world. This view presupposes a particular
sensitivity to the time in which our lives take place and in which the reign
of God begins to unfold, the coming of which we request in the funda-
mental Christian prayer.

Time acquires, in this way, an urgent, salvific, and human density.
Far from being an abstract category, or from being limited to a tiresome
chronological succession, time becomes, thanks to memory, a space where
we encounter the face of Jesus, the Son of God made flesh, and a space for
encounter with others. In time are rooted two liberties, God’s free self-
revelation in the gratuitousness of love and the human freedom to accept
this gift; the first calls forth and constitutes the second.

The present of the past takes us back to the importance that the Bible
gives to the present moment. The present is about the here and now of
the salvific presence of God, which biblical texts like Deuteronomy insist
upon—“The Lord has concluded this alliance with us here today” (Deut.
5:3)—as well as Luke’s Gospel: “This scripture is fulfilled today” (Luke
4:21). Historical events constitute a challenge to commitment and reflec-
tion. It is necessary to live the moment with force and creativity. In our
age, we find ourselves before uncertain and particularly challenging signs.
They invite us to a discernment that will allow us to get to the essential
without getting wrapped up in what is secondary or tangential, the trees
that hide the forest. They call us to situate ourselves before the future,
starting from the present.

For these and other reasons, biblical studies insist on the difference be-
tween history and memory. The connections are clear but subtle; memory
is not history, if we understand history as a simple narrative of past events,
and memory is more than an actualization of what happened. It is a pres-
ent that has its fount in the always active and ever-faithful love of God.
This is a key to comprehension that makes “of history a theophany,”65 a
revelation of the God who calls us to life and rejects any form of unjust
death. It places us, at all times, before the alternative that we find in Deu-
teronomy, a book that brings with it a rich theology of memory: “See,
today I put before you life and good, evil and death . . . blessing and curse.
Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:15, 19).6

The God of the Bible is a God who remembers, a God who does not
forget the covenant established with his people. A number of texts in Scrip-
ture allude to this. For example, “God remembers his covenant, his given
word, for a thousand generations,” says Psalm 105:8–9 at the beginning of a listing of all God has done for Israel in the past, the reason for giving thanks today and always. We are here before an evocation that is permeated with tenderness, despite the fact that many times the people turn away from the received precepts (see Ps. 106:45, the twin of Ps. 105).7 Human beings’ love for God has its roots in divine liberty and gratitude and not in the behavior of those God loves: “He has remembered his loyalty and fidelity to the house of Israel” (Ps. 98:3). It is, in effect, about the loyalty and fidelity of God.

Loyalty (Hebrew: emunah, firmness) gives meaning and strength to the established covenant. This is what makes God trustworthy, demanding and at the same time willing to forgive. Although it seems paradoxical, God forgets the people’s faults because he is a God who remembers: he remembers the promise of love and the covenant (see Wisd. 11:23–24). Indeed, the prayer of the believer is frequently directed to this divine memory: “Remember, Yahweh, that your compassion and loyalty are eternal” (Ps. 25:6, see also Ps. 74:2; 89:51, 119:49). God’s mercy and capacity for love go beyond even the Jewish people; this is what Jonah learns, though at great personal cost, according to the short text, one of the jewels of the First Testament, that tells us his story. Sent to Nineveh to announce the punishment that its conduct deserves, Jonah seeks to shirk his assignment out of fear that the warning will give the inhabitants, who have humiliated and oppressed his own people, the chance to repent and that Yahweh will then forgive them. In the end, however, Jonah is compelled to deliver the message that results in the city’s being spared.

Making God’s Memory Our Own

In the First Testament, whenever a pact was made, two wills were represented. Because of this, in the Bible, God’s memory fosters the memory of the people who believe in him. Deuteronomy is a clear witness to this connection between God’s memory and the behavior of the believer.8 The giving of the law and the norms of conduct begins with “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that Yahweh your God led you out of there” and similar phrases (Deut. 5:15, 15:15, 16:12). The liberating act of Yahweh provides the meaning and the model for social life within Israel but also toward the stranger and the immigrant (Deut. 24:18).9 The way God treats his people is the paradigm for how those who believe in Yahweh should act.
In the Second Testament, we find the same perspective. “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34) is the new commandment of Jesus to his disciples and in them to us. The free and gratuitous love of God, the heart of biblical revelation, is the model of action for the believer. It is the most important content of the memory that indicates the path for the community of Jesus’s disciples, whose commitment is, precisely, to be a sign of that love in history.

Care for the poor is expressed, therefore, in a central theme of the Bible: Jubilee. In a very concrete way, the celebration of the Jubilee gives norms for the social relations of those who recognize Yahweh as their God. These norms of justice and rights are expressed in a primary way by solidarity with and care for the most vulnerable. The Jubilee takes place in history as an event that points constantly toward the return of society to its roots and to faithfulness to God’s will for life: a society of equals in which justice and rights are established. Believers do not place themselves in a dark corner of human history to watch it go by; they are present in it, not spectators but participants in the historical process.

Therefore, the Bible invites us to make God’s memory our own. One of the essential components of this memory is the priority of the oppressed and forgotten ones. Let us take a particularly meaningful text, one that is alluded to in the Gospels, as an example: Deuteronomy 15:1–11.

The fundamental assertion is “There should be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). The goal toward which Israel should be directed in its practice of Yahweh’s precepts appears with total clarity. It is a rejection, without concessions, of poverty—not only as an economic condition but as a global condition of insignificance and of premature and unjust death. To overcome poverty, to propose to oneself the construction of a society without poverty, is to recognize, in practice, the gift of life that comes from God. Thus this is a matter of great complexity, for in it lies the reason for being the people of God.

To this statement the text, in a more realist mode, adds conditionally: “If there are poor among your siblings . . . do not harden your heart or close your hand to your poor sibling, but open your hand and lend what he needs to remedy his poverty” (Deut. 15:7–8). The obstacles to reaching what is proposed do not negate the imperative of giving primary attention to persons in need; even less can they be the motive for a cynical desire to leave things as they are. On the contrary, proper conduct is dictated, precisely and exigently, by the proposed goal: to open one’s hand to the sibling in need in the effort to forge a nation without poverty.10
One cannot deny the persistence of poverty in human history. Thus the text goes one step further and a few verses later affirms what was previously expressed conditionally: “The poor will always be with you” (Deut. 15:11). This statement does not invalidate the search for a society without poverty; rather, it provides an additional reason to reiterate the attitude we have already seen: “Open your hand to your sibling, to the poor, the destitute in your land” (Deut. 15:11). The ideal, what we should strive for, is that there be no poor; if there must be some, the conduct of the believer should be that of opening one’s heart and one’s hand to the poor.

“In Memory of Me”

At the beginning of the church an important encounter took place in Jerusalem among those largely responsible for the proclamation of the Gospel. It was resolved that a kind of division of labor would be undertaken: some would continue to proclaim the Gospel to the Jewish world where it arose, and others would take the good news to the Gentile world. It was not easy, as Paul testified, to see the universal character of the message of Jesus. At the end of this meeting, the pillars of the church at Jerusalem, James, Peter, and John, recognized the meaning of Paul’s work. As they accepted his task they told him, and the others, that they should “remember the poor.” This was a point on which they all agreed, as various texts of that epoch attest (the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles of James and Paul). Paul claims simply and firmly, “It is something we have tried to do with all our effort” (Gal. 2:1–10). The recognition of this dimension of the church’s mission happened early on; the meeting at Jerusalem is believed to have occurred circa AD 40 or 50, and the epistle to the Galatians was composed soon after that.

The text has frequently been interpreted as a direct—almost unique—reference to the help offered to the Christian community in Jerusalem. Some indications point in that direction. For example, in many places the texts speak of Paul’s preoccupation with the organization of a collection to benefit the mother church (see Rom. 15:25–29; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8:1–15; 9; Heb. 11:29–30). It would be tangential to analyze these texts here. In them one can perceive a connection between the realization of the collection and what is affirmed in Galatians. But even the passage that asserts this connection most clearly, Romans 15, specifies that it is about “the poor among the saints of Jerusalem” (v. 26, my emphasis), a group...
that must not be identified, therefore, with all the Christians of that community.\textsuperscript{15}

Furthermore, in Galatians 2:10 there is no direct reference to almsgiving, which was valued at the time as a manifestation of justice and solidarity with the poor. Of course, neither is almsgiving rejected. Thus the application of the phrase “Remember the poor” may be broader and more permanent, and it cannot be excluded that Paul may have considered this concern as an integral part of the apostolic task.\textsuperscript{16} The importance of remembering the poor is especially upheld if we place the recommendation made by the pillars of the church in the greater context of what Paul has discussed about the meaning of what he calls “the truth of the Gospel” in the same letter to the Galatians (1:11–2:14).\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, we find ourselves, it seems, before an intrinsic dimension of the work of evangelization.

This aspect of the proclamation of the reign of God is understood as a demand—“Do this in memory of me”—in Paul and Luke’s accounts of the Last Supper of the Lord. It is a remembrance that goes beyond ritual, or, to be more precise, it is situated in the context of the basic understanding of cult in the Bible: it implies the memory of all of Jesus’s teachings (cf. Matt. 28:20) through “his actions and words.”\textsuperscript{18} The memory of this joining of the testimony of the Lord seals the universality of the mission of his followers, who have been charged to take the good news “to all nations” (Matt. 28:19) and “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The eucharistic celebration, the central act of the life of the church, synthesizes the fundamental aspects of Christian life: the loving memory of God as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the love for all, and the preference for the most insignificant and forgotten come together. The memory of the ways one should proclaim the good news and be faithful to the design of God’s life and to solidarity with others is also included.\textsuperscript{19}

It should not appear strange, then, that theologians and Bible scholars have pointed to how the God of the Bible is associated with the reign with the poor and the insignificant ones. We shall take the testimony of two of them, neither of whom is Latin American. Most clearly, Karl Barth maintains: “God always places himself unconditionally and passionately on the side of the poorest and only on that side: against the proud, always in favor of the humble, against those who possess and defend their rights, and on the side of those to whom those rights are denied.”\textsuperscript{20} For Joachim
Jeremias, in an audacious sentence, the “essential characteristic” of the reign of God is expressed in the first beatitude, in Matthew and in Luke, which should be read as “The reign belongs only to the poor,” keeping in mind that “the Semitic tongues frequently omit the restrictive adverb ‘only.’” This is good news that cannot but scandalize the privileged of the time.21

THE POOR AND POVERTY

Recently a series of historical events and new approaches to the analysis of historical reality have prompted an important change in how we understand the reality of poverty. For a long time poverty was considered a natural fact independent of human will: one was born either rich or poor. But poverty is not a fate; it is a condition, not a destiny; an injustice, not a misfortune.

A New Perception

Various factors led to a different understanding of poverty. The visibility of the misery and marginalization of many people, the appearance of movements in defense of workers and of those who have no access to work, the demands for the respect of the human dignity and human rights of each person, the demand to create a just social order, and the contribution of social sciences—subject to critical examination—for a better knowledge of the socioeconomic mechanisms involved all had a decisive role in the change. The growing awareness that poor peoples of the world took from their situation, their abilities, and their culture had a crucial function in this process.

It became clear that poverty is the result of the way society has been organized, in its diverse manifestations. Thus poverty results from human decisions that create social structures and give birth to racial, cultural, and gender prejudices that have accumulated throughout history. Consequently, the notion that the transformation of society is out of our hands gained ground. This perspective points to a collective responsibility, with an emphasis on who in society has the most power and privilege. It is that simple and that revolutionary. Since it was first proposed, the understanding of the complex reality that is encompassed by the word poverty has changed radically, leading to the rethinking, not the abandonment, of the classical
forms of attending to the condition of need (such as direct and personal help and social assistance in cases of extreme poverty).

Despite the evidence, we cannot say that the new perspective—which centrally takes into account the causes of poverty—has become a generally accepted opinion in today’s world, especially in Christian contexts. The inertia of the old ways of facing this condition and the resistance to a point of view that is undoubtedly questioning, if not conflictive, impedes this acceptance. Furthermore, in our days we are witnessing an insistent and concerted effort to return to one of the most tired reasons that has been trotted out in the past to explain poverty: the poor themselves are responsible for the situation in which they live. If at other times in history it has been said that poverty was a punishment for moral failings, now it is said that poverty is the responsibility of the poor due to their incompetence, negligence, or laziness. This understanding gives excuses for not facing the current situation head on but does not prevent an analysis of poverty’s structural causes.

A Complex and Planetary Reality

Poverty is a complex reality that is not limited to its economic aspect, however important that may be. From the beginning of its reflection on poverty, liberation theology perceived this diversity because the reality of multicultural and multiracial countries (as are the majority in Latin America) offered a direct and inevitable experience of it and because the Bible represents the poor in diverse ways. This complexity of poverty was affirmed from the beginning, despite the later deepening of its particulars, in what today international agencies have begun to term multidimensionality. The early expressions nonpersons and insignificant ones used in liberation theology for speaking of the poor pointed to this complexity. They were used to bring to mind all those who were not recognized in their full human dignity. Such nonrecognition occurs for various reasons, especially economic but also racial, gender based, and cultural. All these can mark human conditions that the dominant mentality of our societies does not value. This judgment depends on mental categories and on social structures that remain under our control to change. Naturally, recognizing the multidimensionality of poverty leads us to see the delicate and conflictive nature of the issue, which is why many seek to obscure the variety of these causes. Discussing them, though, is demanded by honesty and is the only way we can get beyond an inhuman situation.
Additionally, the planetary dimensions of the situation in which the majority of humanity finds itself are being increasingly perceived. This pertains to all the aspects of poverty, but in terms of its economic aspect—the easiest to perceive—in the past persons would recognize only poverty that was near their homes or, at most, in their countries. Their responsiveness was limited to what they had before their eyes and within their reach. The conditions of life did not permit them to have a sufficient understanding of the state of things. This situation has changed qualitatively because of the ease with which information can be gathered. What used to be distant and remote has become proximate and common. Furthermore, the studies on mass poverty carried out by countless organizations have multiplied the information available and the various methodological approaches to the complex reality of poverty.

Another element that has modified our approach to the subject of poverty is the deepening of poverty worldwide and the growth of the gap between rich and poor individuals and countries. This gap, according to certain economists, is leading to what has been called neodualism: the world’s population is increasingly found at the two ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Culture, race, and gender do much to determine placement on one side or the other of the divide. The effect of gender has led to justified talk about the feminization of poverty. Women constitute the sector of society most affected by poverty and discrimination, especially if they belong to oppressed cultures or ethnicities. The gap between rich and poor has been widening for decades but has now reached scandalous proportions.

Today we can no longer be ignorant of the causes of poverty or unaware of its complexity, extent, and depth, whether or not we have a direct experience of it. All of this information should be crucial in determining how we can manifest the human and Christian quality of solidarity with the poor.

**Poverty as a Negation of Life**

Life, a gift from God, is also the first human right. The poverty and insignificance in which many people live violates that right. In effect, poverty means death, both physical death that is early and unjust, due to lack of the most basic necessities for life, and cultural death, as expressed in oppression and discrimination for reasons of race, culture, or gender. Theologically speaking, poverty is the negation of the significance of creation.
It is contrary to the will-to-life of the Creator-God. To go to the root of the problem theologically is not to obviate its economic and social dimensions or the mechanisms of oppression and marginalization that produce it but merely to grasp poverty’s cruel and deep meaning: its radical rejection of life, the gift of God, as this life is manifested in the narrative of creation.

Therefore, we find in Scripture the repudiation of poverty but along with this the denunciation of those responsible for this situation, who are frequently driven by selfishness and indifference toward other members of society. These are attitudes that, in a faith-based analysis, we call sin: the negation of the love of God and neighbor, which the Bible also calls death. Poverty is tied to injustice. The difficult biblical texts of prophets like Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and, of course, of other biblical authors on the subject are well known. The guilty ones are openly named. The Second Testament condemns, likewise, the abuse and violence suffered by the poor and contrasts their situation with that of the rich and powerful, of whom they are many times the victims. The Gospel of Luke and the terms used in the epistle of James are clear testimonies to this way of seeing things, but of course they are not the only ones. In various places this view is presented by what has been called the “messianic inversion,” the insistence—expressed in various ways—that “the last shall be first.” All these texts will later inspire various writings in defense of the poor from those known as the fathers of the church.

A Theological Matter

The condition of the poor, because it is deeply tied to inhumanity, is a radical and global challenge to the human and Christian conscience. No one—no matter their geographical or social location, their culture or religion—can pretend that they are not gripped by it. To perceive the condition of the poor, it is necessary to see poverty in all its depth and breadth. It is a challenge that extends beyond the social field, becoming a demand to think about how we proclaim the Gospel in our day and how we might present the themes of the Christian message in new ways. Poverty, in all its complexity and multidimensionality, is the negation of God’s will-to-life; it is a situation that wounds, in many regards, the very heart of the good news of Jesus. The Christian is a witness to the resurrection, the definitive victory over all forms of death.33
We stand, then, before an issue that is fully a part of the context of theological reflection. Nevertheless, a good part of academic theology still has difficulty in recognizing this problem. Some insist on pigeonholing poverty in the category of social or economic problems without noting that this is only an aspect, albeit an important one, of a complex phenomenon of insignificance and exclusion. For this reason, they suggest that reflections that come from the situation of the poor and marginalized find their proper place in the frame of the social teachings of the Christian churches, which is undoubtedly important, but this position reveals only a partial understanding of the problem. Or, in the best cases, such reflections are considered contextual theologies, as if all theologies, including European or, more generally, North American theologies, were not contextual. A noncontextual theology, and there are those that claim to be such, would be so abstract as to be useless for the life of a community seeking to witness in history to the God-made-human.34

The questioning that comes from the least ones of society does not remain at the margins of the theological task. The issue has an impact on long-debated themes, and it takes theological reflection down new roads. For example, in the years around the time of the council, the concern for building society was seen as not only different but separate from the task of evangelization, or, more favorably, as merely an important part of pre-evangelization. Certain progressive theologies of the time went a step further, valuing the Christian commitment to social justice but still hesitating with regard to its evangelizing status.

The state of the matter today is quite different. Theological reflections, including those of Latin America, ecclesial events such as the Medellín conference, and other factors have led to a more comprehensive and precise language that is being assumed, bit by bit, in various instances by the ecclesial magisterium.35 As John Paul II noted in December 2001 in an address to the Honduran bishops, “We should not forget that the preoccupation for that which is social is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church and that promotion of the human is part of evangelization, for this leads to the integral liberation of the person.” This is why, the pope continued, the church should be attentive to the cries of the needy and insist on the “preferential option for the poor.”36 These are the same affirmations that thirty years ago were accused of reducing evangelization to the construction of a just society in the temporal realm.
To conclude, I will consider future tasks for the church with regard to the three realms in which a commitment to the option for the poor can be situated: the proclamation of the social and pastoral Gospel, theological reflection, and spiritual life. We shall do this, furthermore, with an eye toward future tasks.

**Against the Grain**

The term *option* in the phrase *preferential option for the poor* can be properly understood only if we go to its roots, namely the sense it was given by Latin American theology in the mid-1960s, which would later be expressed at Medellin, of a Christian commitment to the poor. According to this focus, the commitment has two intimately linked aspects: solidarity with the poor and protest against the inhuman situation of poverty in which they live. The option for the poor has to do with a lifestyle and not with sporadic acts of proximity or assistance to the poor. That option is a perspective on human history that sets in motion our own lives and enables us to understand the Christian message.

It is urgent, as Walter Benjamin said, to read history against the grain, to consider events from the underside of history, regarding not only the problems that affect the poor most immediately but also other situations in which humanity is involved and other matters of Christian faith. Moreover, this perspective can open up unexplored ways to perceive faith as a wellspring of Easter joy; even though it must travel through a period of stripping and death, but in the final instance it is an affirmation of life as a whole, material and spiritual. Thus it seems good to take up again in present terms what the challenge of poverty signifies for a faith seeking understanding. A perspective from the underside of history, from the experience of the “crucified peoples,” as Ignacio Ellacuría called them, invites us to make our own the memory of the God of Jesus. In the hungry and the thirsty, the ragged and the marginalized of history, we should recognize the face of Christ. Only in this way will the proclamation of the good news manifest its prophetic dimensions.

This point of departure should include the sufferings but also the joys and the hopes of the poor. To keep in mind the ills of those who suffer mistreatment and exclusion is extremely important, but to recognize only this
is to see only one aspect of a broad and complex reality. The situation of the poor does not make them less human, and all human beings experience moments of authentic joy and laughter, no matter how humble, fragile, or transitory these may seem to those who view them from afar. It is precisely these moments that sustain them as human beings. Similarly, all people have plans and hopes of their own, many times anchored in cultural values and in religious faith, even people who must fight against resigning themselves to a status quo that claims to be inevitable.

Recognition of these aspects of the condition of the poor is not meant to downplay their victimization or the systematic violation of their most fundamental human rights. It is part of remembering their humanity: the fact that they are not simply objects to pity or help but, above all, persons destined to be the subjects of their own destiny and history. The theological reflection that begins from these people takes into account all these elements and does not pretend to be—as is said many times with goodwill that we are all aware of—“the voice of the voiceless,” except in very special cases. Instead, the option for the poor is a contribution that empowers them to take ownership of their own voice by proclaiming the Gospel’s challenge to remember their human dignity as daughters and sons of God.

Theology as a Hermeneutic of Hope

To give an account of our hope is an essential part of the Christian witness (see 1 Pet. 3:15). Theology situates itself in this context. It is always an interpretation of the motives we have for hoping. In this consists its prophetic nature, that which makes it always alert to the signs of the times.

Hope is, first of all, a gift from God. It pertains to God’s plans for us. Jeremiah remembers this as he transmits the message of the Lord: “I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare [shalom] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). It was not an easy hope for the prophet. His nation, the next to fall under the domination of an enemy power, was devastated and imprisoned by despair. Jeremiah suffered with his people. However, a family’s offer to sell some land, at a time when no one expected anything from the future of his nation, made him understand that God wanted him to accept the proposal in order to express, with this concrete and, under the circumstances, incomprehensible act, that even in the midst of hardship it is possible to hope for better times.
The witness of Jeremiah is exemplary. The times we are living in are not easy, particularly for those who are most vulnerable in society. We have already mentioned the huge and still growing social, cultural, and knowledge gaps that separate individuals and peoples. Further, a formidable campaign is being waged to convince everyone, especially the poor, that we are living in a radically new time with little, if any, historical relationship to the period immediately preceding it. In this view nothing, or almost nothing, that we have lived before this day should be relevant in the future. We are at a new beginning in an era that is “post-” everything we have ever known: a postmodern, postindustrial, postcapitalist, postcolonial, and postsocialist society. We stand before the deaths of philosophy, metaphysics, ideologies, and utopias. It has even been affirmed, with unintended humor, that we are at the end of history.

We cannot deny the huge changes that have occurred in our time, and we can find important values in several of the trends described above. However, it is one thing to recognize the unexplored extent or complexity of what is opening up before our eyes today and a very different thing to be blinded by the novelty of the moment. It is true that we must reevaluate many things: many of the analyses, categories, and propositions enunciated in recent years have become obsolete. But to advance these ideas in absolute, a-critical terms could lead to the erasing of the historical memory of the poor and could generate a certain skepticism regarding the possibility of changing the status quo, with consequences that range from passivity to desperation. Globalization is a fact, and there is no sense in talking about turning the clock back; what is at issue here is how it will be implemented. To be against globalization as such is like being against electricity. However, this cannot lead us to resign ourselves to the present order of things because globalization as it is now being carried out exacerbates the unjust inequalities among different sectors of humanity and the social, economic, political, and cultural exclusion of a good portion of the world’s population. New forms of exclusion reinforce, for their part, the condition of insignificance of the poor.

In the complexity of the current hour, with its novelties and its burdens, we are called to live and witness to the Gospel of Jesus. Called to live the memory of God in our time, we can also perceive new and promising ways of living in society, living the life of faith, and embracing the gift of hope vividly and creatively. Theology, insofar as it is a hermeneutic of hope, has an important role to play. Our theology, inspired by examples
like Jeremiah, should encourage us to “take possession of the land” so that we may affirm and construct a new future.

The Following of Jesus

Liberation theology understands theological discourse as critical reflection on practice in the light of faith, which is the same as saying that it is a reflection from the perspective of following Jesus. In this profound conviction I have been influenced by my longtime contact with the person and work of Marie-Dominique Chenu, who saw following Jesus as the foundation of theology. “Definitely,” said this great teacher, “theological systems are nothing but the expression of spiritualities. In this consists their interest and their greatness.” From there he offers a luminous definition of discourse about the faith: “A theology worthy of the name is a spirituality that has found rational instruments adequate to its religious experience.”37 This is truly the understanding of faith. Spirituality is its axis. Spirituality gives theology its most profound meaning.

A text from the Gospels in a way summarizes many of the points we have explored: the story known as the anointing at Bethany. I will draw on the version in Mark 14:3–9 because it seems particularly meaningful. But the story is found in all four Gospels, an indication of the impression it left in the memories of Jesus’s followers.

When an anonymous woman overturns a jar of perfume on Jesus, those present—perhaps the disciples themselves—criticize her for the waste of money in the act of service she has performed. The argument they use against her attempts to conform to the teaching of Jesus: “The perfume could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, which could have been given to the poor.” But Jesus defends the woman, replying, “She has done a good deed for me.” The word we have translated as “good” is kalos, which also means “beautiful.” The woman has performed a beautiful act, with everything that word presupposes of gratuitousness, of something not immediately useful. Jesus adds, responding to the murmurs of those present, “The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me” (Matt. 26:11).38 The responsibility toward the poor is a daily one; our solidarity with them and the search for justice is ongoing. A few lines later, Jesus specifies the nature of the woman’s act: “She has done what she can. She has anticipated my embalming for burial.” Jesus, on the eve of his imprisonment and execution, is vulnerable; he can
do nothing before the powers of his day that have already condemned him to death. He is a victim who cannot delay the threat that hangs over him. He is at a unique and unrepeatable moment in his life. Neither can the woman do anything; she is insignificant, being a woman and being anonymous, except for expressing her affection and wishing him life with her beautiful gesture, without expecting any results.

We stand now before the two great dimensions of Christian life, namely gratuitousness and justice: gratitude for the initial love of God, which reminds us that all love is at root gratuitous, and the practice of justice, the recognition of the rights of all, especially the poorest ones. From there are derived two ways of speaking about God, which is theology; the contemplative language of mysticism and the prophetic language of justice, which we distinguish but do not separate, are mutually enriching and ultimately become one. We find them both in the text from Mark. Jesus keeps his attention on, and solidarity with, the poor, an inescapable daily task of the Christian that Jesus’s witness demonstrates clearly. For her part, the anonymous woman expresses an unconditional affection in her gratuitous act, a desire—without immediate results—for life and a pure friendship. Without such gratuitousness there is no true solidarity with the poor, since they not only have material necessities but also seek to be treated with dignity as equal persons, to be accepted and understood. This is why they are so sensitive to disinterested acts of friendship.

In this context, we can understand and even measure the impact of Jesus’s final words in this episode: “I assure you, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” What is less understood, or perhaps it is understood, is how little has really been said of her throughout the two thousand years of the proclamation of the good news.

Notes

4. These studies have multiplied in recent years. Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Chatham: W. and J. Mackay, 1962), and Willy Schottroff, “Gedenken” im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964), are two classics on this theme.

5. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 13. The author insists on the difference between memory and history: “The biblical call to remember has little to do with curiosity about the past” (10).

6. This text is part of the so-called “Testament of Moses.” See also Deut. 11:26–28; a similar option is presented in Mark 3:1–6.


8. This connection is the center of the interpretation of the text presented by Walter Brueggemann in *Deuteronomy* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).

9. The question of the immigrant is increasingly important in our day; in it the situation of the poor takes on new, unseen conditions and possibilities. See Daniel Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).

10. Jeffries Hamilton considers that the expression “open your hand” is a call to constitute a society in which no one is dependent upon and oppressed by others. This is directed with urgency to those who have some type of power to achieve the necessary changes. Jeffries Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 13–19.

11. This phrase is cited in the Gospels and often used blatantly out of context to discount the meaning and possibility of solidarity with the poor.

12. See especially the chapter on Deuteronomy in M. Díaz Mateos, “Tu hermano pobre (Dt 15:7),” *Paginas* 121 (June 1993): 63–75.

13. The term used here for the poor is *ptojoi* (beggars, destitute ones), the most common term of the Second Testament.

14. We will limit ourselves to a mention made by Paul to ground the generosity that should be the impetus for the collection: “[Christ,] who was rich, made himself poor [literally, “he impoverished himself” (with the verb corresponding to *ptojós*), so that you could become rich from his poverty” (2 Cor. 8:9). The text is frequently cited as an expression of the material poverty of Jesus. Nevertheless, Paul’s expression does not seem to point to this, at least not at first. More than a reference to a social state—just as “rich” is not a socioeconomic situation alone—the passage has a theological significance bearing on the Incarnation that we find in Philippians 2:6–11. Being God, he became one of us; to become poor in this case would be equivalent to becoming a human being. Nevertheless, the metaphor is meaningful also for our theme: the solidarity of Jesus with the poor made him care about their destiny and ultimately took him to the cross.

15. Some authors interpreted the term *poor* to designate the church. For them, the passage from Galatians and the other texts alluded to referred, then, not to
the needy, but to the “saints,” to all the members of the Jerusalem Church. The appearance on the scene of the Qumran manuscripts gave new life to this theory years later, as the subject is frequently discussed in commentaries on these texts. But, as L. E. Keck (from whom we take this information) has proven, there is no solid basis for affirming the synonymous nature of the poor and the saints (the Christian community). L. E. Keck, “The Poor among the Saints in the New Testament,” Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 1–2 (1966): 54–78.


17. This is the conclusion, after a careful analysis of the debate in Jerusalem, of Fern K. T. Clarke’s “Remembering the Poor: Does Galatians 2:10 Allude to the Collection?” Scripture Bulletin 1 (January 2001): 20–28.


19. In this sense we have said that “the first task of the Church is to celebrate . . . the Eucharist: memorial and thanksgiving.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971), 325.

20. Karl Barth, Dogmatics, 2.1–2 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1957), 135. A few lines further down, he adds: “It is necessary to understand, from the start, that the justice of God, the action by which he is loyal to himself—which is manifested as help and liberation, as a saving intervention on behalf of persons—is directed to the poor, the miserable, and the abandoned as such and to them alone; it has absolutely nothing to do with the rich, the satisfied and their security” (136).


22. Dom Helder Camara’s phrase is well known: “If I talk about the poor, people tell me that I’m a saint; if I talk about the causes of poverty, they tell me I’m a communist.”


24. Part of the responsibility, in a complex issue like poverty, reaches, in some way, every person. But this responsibility is shared unequally—that which can be attributed to the poor is decidedly false or at least exaggerated in the interpretation to which we refer.

25. In effect, the Bible speaks very little of poverty. It refers, more often, to the poor. The biblical vocabulary is diverse; it does not allow for a conceptual definition of who is a poor person. Rather, like a photograph, it provides a description. This is the view of one of the pioneers of biblical study of the subject,

See also Elsa Tamez, *La biblia de los oprimidos* (San Jose de Costa Rica: DEI, 1979).

26. With the expression *nonperson* we are designating the interlocutor of theologies of liberation, in contrast to the nonbeliever, the interlocutor of modern theologies.

27. For this reason, keeping in mind that the “economic, social, cultural and racial coordinates” are crucial to understanding poverty, we spoke of the poor as “peoples, races, and social classes” (Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 226, 251; see also 255) and of the “exploited popular classes, oppressed cultures, and races experiencing discrimination” (“Praxis de liberación y fé cristiana,” in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* [Lima: CEP, 1979], 65; see also 64, 90, 107, 111, 114, 125).


29. “The woman in these groups [the poor] is doubly exploited, marginalized, and oppressed.” Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología desde el reverso de la historia* (Lima: CEP, 1977), 34 n. 36, and “The Historical Force of the Poor,” in *Signos de lucha y esperanza* (Lima: CEP, 1978), 173. Puebla picks up on this perspective some time later; see what was said by the Peruvian delegation to Puebla. In a paragraph entitled, significantly, “Liberacion de la Mujer,” after affirming that “Medellín did not take up” this problem, the text notes that despite a new awareness of women’s rights, “radically changing [a woman’s] conditions of life and her social functions,” the church and society still have an important task, since in many situations woman “is still not considered a person.” CELAM III (Puebla, Mexico, 1979), *Puebla Conference: Final Document. Visión Pastoral de América Latina: Equipo de Reflexión, Departamentos y Secciones de CELAM* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1979), apotre 20, nos. 317–27.

31. We are alluding, to be sure, to real poverty, which is at times called material poverty. For the moment, what we know as spiritual poverty or spiritual childhood, which occupies a central place in the biblical message, does not come into our consideration. It will be considered later.

32. This leads Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, superior general of the Jesuits, to say, “God has always been a God of the poor because the poor are the visible proof of a failure in the work of creation” and “The motive [for Jesus’s prioritizing attention to the poor] is that, in the name of his Creator Father, the existence of the poor is declared scandalous, the failure of God’s plan.” Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “El grito del poverii e il Vangelo,” La Civilitá Cattolica 4 (1993): 117.

33. Johann Baptist Metz has recalled forcefully the importance of memory for the victims of history, in that it ties them, in a final way, to the passion of Jesus. Their victimhood is a painful component of the daily life of the poor, in which we also find projects, hopes, and joys.

34. The true difference is, rather, between theologies recognizing explicitly their social context and theologies thinking they are free from any historical context in which they exist.


36. At the inaugural discourse of Puebla (1979), the pope had already spoken of an intrinsic link between the two commitments. CELAM III, Puebla Conference.

37. Marie-Dominique Chenu, École de théologie: Le Saulchoir (Tournai: Kain-lez-Tournai, 1937), 75.

38. Ibid.

39. This phrase was taken up as the title of an important book by Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983).